



The Earth Transformed: An Untold Story
by Peter Frankopan
Bloomsbury, 2023

This book is a welcome reappraisal of world history through the eyes of an historian with a green lens. Peter Frankopan looks at historical developments 'anthropogenically', that is the extent to which humans have caused negative changes to the planetary environment over the centuries. Frankopan was a good choice for this new undertaking, given his vast knowledge of Central Asian history displayed in his book *The Silk Roads*.

Earth Transformed is filled with historical insights across many continents, and ought to be essential reading for those interested in the fight to save the planet. It is a long book, crammed with information, so it requires steady reading.

The book does not necessarily argue that humans have been entirely responsible for climate change, not at least before the twentieth century. It points out that natural phenomena like El Nino, La Nina (pacific weather systems) and volcanic eruptions can have an effect on our human condition and the way we behave. During the Little Ice Age of 1550-1800, for example, the cold had an effect on rulers' designs to conquer: Sweden, for example, could not hold on to Russian territory because of icy conditions.

Significantly, though, Frankopan questions the rampant policies of the West around the 1500s, as it exploited the South through mass importation of commodities and manipulation of Africans for the slave trade, both signs of a lack of respect for the natural order, and a sign of worse things to come. Deforestation by everyone, from Mughal rulers to the Qing dynasty, had bad consequences for soil degradation. This tendency to exploit was carried forward on an industrial scale in the twentieth century, the consequence being that human beings are now mainly responsible for shifts in atmospheric temperatures.

In the book, there are insights into the various religions' views of God's natural world. The idea of religious guardianship of our planet has been well established among many religions for thousands of years. For example, the original Hindu scripts called the 'Vedas' were written in 1500 BC. These accounts in Sanskrit refer to the Vedic worlds of earth, heaven and mid-space, which have to be held in balance. The Artharva Veda says that 'the earth is our mother and we are its children'.

Similarly, the old Jainist religion emphasised that 'injury to the earth is like striking, cutting, maiming or killing a blind man'. It was a hadith (saying) of Muhammad, the founder of Islam, that went: 'the world is beautiful and verdant and God has appointed you as his stewards over it'. The Japanese Confucian

thinker Kaibara Ekken said that 'no living creatures like birds, beasts, insects and fish should be killed wantonly'.

In the Christian Bible, it makes plain right from the start in Genesis 1 that God devised Creation and that we should respect it. Further appreciation for the natural order is seen throughout the texts, even if less explicitly. Psalm 23 refers to the Lord telling us to lie down in green pastures, reminding us of our roots. In Exodus, Moses told the Israelites in the wilderness that they could not expect always to rely on their own small-scale gardening culture like they did in Egypt, but should depend rather on their Promised Land to be 'watered by the rains of heaven'. Jesus's feeding of the five thousand also illustrates God being the ample provider of our needs, which sits in stark contrast to our tendency to be poor managers of the land.

It is the twentieth century and the first quarter of the twenty-first century which have caused the most trouble. Leaders often viewed nature with wanton disregard: pesticides used by the US government killed not only people but nature too in the Vietnam War; Khrushchev was obsessed with mass corn manufacture to the detriment of the land; and Mao said he could overpower nature.

There are some scary and sobering facts. Cities today generate 70% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, of which almost half are generated by the megacities of China. One single US F-35A fighter on a training sortie jet produces twenty-eight tons of carbon dioxide emissions as it merely 'practises' for war. By 2078 most of the northern hemisphere could be susceptible to malaria and dengue fever if current rates of global warming continue. Just as startlingly: ticket-holders at the Glastonbury Festival in 2022 signed a Green Pledge in the presence of the activist Greta Thunberg, only for festival-goers to leave an average of 10kg of waste behind per person.

It's a tall order to sort out our planet, and it's going to take every one of us to commit to save it.